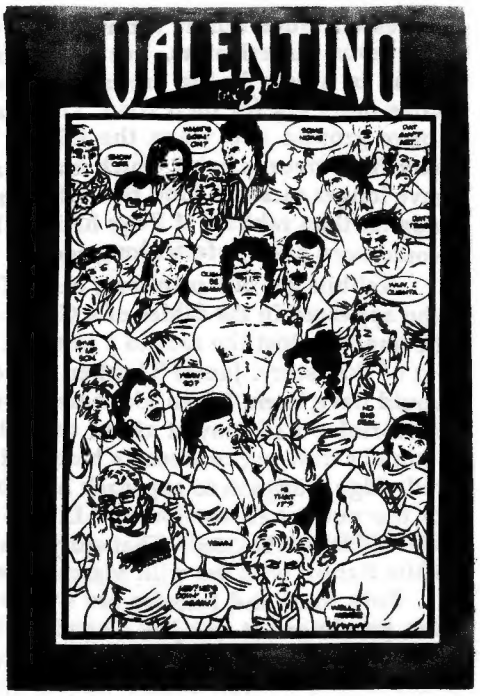

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THE EASTER RABBIT IS A DOE

We all know that male rabbits don't lay eggs to basket up and take around to all the little kids on Easter morning, right? Wrong? So where did we get that idea? How did eggs become associated with Easter in the first place. Well, the egg is a symbol of resurrection and new life in numerous cultures, and it filtered into Christianity by way of Persia and Egypt, but how did that rabbit get into the act? Was he one of the hares that attended the Goddess Harfa in old Scandinavia? Maybe, but it's more likely his association with Easter came from Oestra, a hare-headed teutonic fertility goddess. She made the first hare from a bird and on Oestra's day, the little rabbit laid a single egg in gratitude for being created. The hare is one of the most fertile of mammals. He and his rabbit relatives have covered the earth with 44-70 species extant [those natural historians disagree]. Jack rabbits reached plague proportions in various parts of the world in the late nineteenth century. Frank Norris devoted an entire chapter of his novel, THE OCTOPUS (1901), to a giant rabbit-round-up in the San Joaquin Valley, and his account was authentic. Numerous articles about rabbit round-ups appeared in the popular magazines of this period; indeed, Australia still has a problem with lepus over-population. By the mid-1930s, science was being used against these furry little predecessors to the tribble. Long an experimental laboratory animal, rabbit populations were infiltrated with rabbits inflicted with Myxomatosis, a deadly virus. So they all died, huh? Nope. The tough ones became immune and lived on to star in WATERSHIP DOWN (1972).

It's almost impossible to get through a single day without encountering the rabbit world. You walk down the street and there are stuffed bunnies in the store windows. You go in for a sugar hit and there is a chocolate rabbit waiting to fatten you up. You sit down on a bus stop to eat your forbidden bunny and someone around you will be talking about bunnies. "She used to be a Playboy bunny, y'know, until they closed the clubs." "Oh, you remember, that actor with the harelip who went to jail for using cocaine in England a couple years back, what was his name?" "Well, I don't know what you want to go out with him for. He's as timid as a rabbit." "None of that salad for me. I hate all that rabbit food." "She's got those teeth just like a rabbit." "Just get it out, honey. Don't rabbit about it so." "Well, she read that story about PETER RABBIT and she was just terrified of Farmer McGregor. I had to sit up with her that night." "You shut up and be a good little boy or the Easter bunny won't bring you any eggs tomorrow morning." You go home and pop on the tube and there is Bugs Bunny shooting it out with Yosemite Sam and the Trix Bunny trying to get you to eat more cereal. You turn on nostalgic radio and what do you hear? Ray Anthony playing the 'Bunny Hop," which became a dance craze in the forties.

We quietly accepted the Easter bunny when I was a kid. No one was bothered by a male bunny laying all those eggs. like Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy, he just *was*. The rabbits I knew about were those I had seen on the farm in Nebraska. I must have watched my dad and uncle Jack skin hundreds of them after their hunting trips. Coming home at night we saw them in the headlights. They were night feeders and I never saw them in the day time. Seton's Raggylug was a careful little critter. The hawks and owls, foxes, ferrets, and weasels were always after his poor little bones. And he wasn't all that good to eat. Those jacks are so lean, you have to be a fox to want to bite into something like that. The jack rabbit is a hare. It's only the European wild rabbit who is a true rabbit, but Americans seldom say hare. To them, they're all rabbits or bunnies, and the ones seen most often are domestic pets like that poor little character who got stewed in FATAL ATTRACTION. There *are* a lot of differences. Rabbits burrow and hares don't. Hares are born fully-furred and they can see and carry on independently from birth. Rabbits are born naked and blind. They don't have their sight and fur until they are about ten days old. A hare might hide in a burrow once in awhile, but it's one some other animal dug. That's what

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makes old Bugs Bunny a fraud. He's clearly a jackrabbit, old lepus Americanus, but those animators have him living in a hole in the ground. He even eats carrots and hares don't dig for their food. They eat mostly vegetation above ground and when the winter comes they eat the bark from trees, a habit which makes a farmer mad. Hares have longer ears and hind feet. They are bigger, faster, and tougher than rabbits. If Bugs had really been a bunny, he would been hassenpfeffer long ago.

Rabbits got into print very early. The first was the hare who appeared in the fables of a Greek slave named Aesop, the one who lost the race to a tortoise. I always got a kick out of that story. James Thurber retold it once the way it would have been. When his hare crossed the finish line, the tortoise had moved about three inches. It was John Tenniel's drawing of Aesop's hare that influenced Charles Ludwidge Dodgson to approach him to do the illustrations for the published version of ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND (1865). That story contrasted the civilized White Rabbit with the wild March Hare.

Both hare and tortoise are tricksters in African folk tales, you know. It was Joel Chandler Harris who focussed on Brer Rabbit. Brer Terrapin didn't inspire him much. Many Southwestern Indian tribes think of hare as the creator of the earth. The Great Hare stole fire and brought it to some tribes. There is a rabbit dance which celebrates that event. Most of the folk tales you hear about rabbits from the Indians show an African influence which came from the Southern blacks. Brer Rabbit did and did not influence Beatrix Potter. She knew about the Brer Rabbit stories and even tried to sell some of her illustrations for an edition of the Uncle Remus stories, but her bent was natural history and she told her story about Peter to Noel Moore in 1893 in a way that would show realistic rabbit behavior with an overlay of Victorian sentimentalism. Not *too* sentimental though. In the first version, Beatrix had Peter's father served *in a pie* to Farmer McGregor by Mrs. McGregor. This part of the story, along with the illustration, was cut from later versions of the tale. Howard Garis and Thornton W. Burgess knew about Peter Rabbit, but neither copied that specific character to any extent. Burgess explained in his autobiography that the success of Potter's bunny had children thinking of all rabbits as Peter, so he simply accepted the name for the character in his nature series. Garis projected himself into Uncle Wiggily, while Burgess, more of a naturalist like Potter, emphasized actual animal behavior. His Peter Rabbit did not drive a car or go ice skating like Uncle Wiggily, although in Cady's comic strip version, Burgess's Peter became more human than rabbit.

In the twentieth century, rabbits infiltrated all kinds of literature and entertainment. The first animated rabbit to gain a reputation was Walt Disney's version of Oswald The Lucky Rabbit (1926-7). Disney failed to copyright him and Oswald wound up working for Carl Laemmle's Universal Studios with Walter Lantz directing (1929). Walt used rabbits in a few Silly Symphonies (FUNNY LITTLE BUNNIES, THE TORTOISE AND THE HARE, and TOBY TORTOISE RETURNS), but he dropped Max Hare rather than build him into a star. Max was the braggart who blew the race to Toby Tortoise in 1935 and he was boosted by Warner Brothers' Termite Terrace crew in 1939. In the next few years, they restyled him into Bugs Bunny, a character named for his first director Bugs Hardaway, though directed mainly by Tex Avery, Bob Clampett, Chuck Jones and Bob McKimson.

The rabbit influence on literature is profound. Poets like John Keats and James Whitcomb Riley and Wallace Stevens have written about the critter and he symbolizes different things to different cultures. Interest in Brer Rabbit

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was revived in 1946 when Walt Disney released his version of the Uncle Remus story as SONG OF THE SOUTH. Toni Morrison wrote a novel, TAR BABY, which used Brer Rabbit as a symbol of the black slave who escaped the tar baby of white culture. John Updike used this folk background in his trilogy about Rabbit Angstrom in the 1960's (RABBIT RUN, RABBIT REDUX, and RABBIT IS RICH). Robert Lawson was closer To Potter, Burgess, and the other naturalists when he wrote RABBIT HILL (1946) and A TOUGH WINTER (1954), Both of which influenced Adams' WATERSHIP DOWN (1972), While Thomas Sanchez drifted back to Washo Indian lore for his novel RABBIT BOSS. Mary Chase's HARVEY (originally titled THE WHITE RABBIT in 1943), a play about a 6 foot, one and a half inch invisible rabbit, is not really a part of the rabbit world, because Harvey was a pukka and could have been any animal. With the exception of a few superficial details, this is true of nearly all of the rabbits that appear in animated cartoons and comic books. It is less true of children's stories like Steven Cosgrove's LOP TALES because the children's writer is more likely to write about actual rabbits than to use the rabbit as a symbol.

The real rabbit goes back millions of years, first appearing in the Oligocene age as Paleonolagus, then in the Pliocene as Hypolagus. He was originally classed as a rodent (from rodentia, meaning to gnaw). He is now placed in the order Lagomorpha (hare-shaped) and the family Leporidae. Hares belong to the genus Lepus. The Chinese made him a member of the Zodiac and every twelfth year is a year of the rabbit. Ancient Chinese saw him in the moon. He was grinding out the elixir of life with a mortar and pestle while seated beneath a cassia tree. Ancient East Indians, looking up at the same moon, saw a running hare. Somehow, in European oral tradition, he became the man in the moon. By the middle ages, the hare was suspected of being a witch's familiar, one of many animal forms witches were suspected of using to accomplish their ends. He continued to be associated with the harvest and was considered a corn spirit.

COMIX PLUGOLA

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